DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 339 052 CS 507 627

AUTHOR Goulden, Nancy R.
TITLE Improving Instructors' Speaking Skills. Idea Paper No. 24.
INSTITUTION Kansas State Univ., Manhattan. Center for Faculty Evaluation and Development in Higher Education.
PUB DATE Jan 91
NOTE 6p.; For a related paper, see CS 507 626.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Communication; *Communication Skills; Higher Education; Instructional Improvement; Speech Communication; *Teacher Behavior; *Teacher Improvement
IDENTIFIERS *Communication Strategies

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that instructors can enhance the effectiveness of oral instruction through attention to both the verbal and nonverbal aspects of their teaching. After defining and offering 2 means of achieving effective speaking, the paper discusses how lecturers should analyze their delivery, and makes 32 recommendations for improving delivery, focusing on vocal problems, positive vocal strategies, use of body, and positive body delivery characteristics. Finally, the paper offers suggestions for putting the 32 recommendations into practice, specifically discussing identification of problems, delivery style, mental focus, and preparation. Fourteen references are attached. (PRA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED339052

IDEA PAPER NO. 24

January, 1991

Improving Instructors' Speaking Skills

Nancy R. Goulden

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

William E. Cashin

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

IR 050 627

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

IDEA PAPER NO. 24

January, 1991

Improving Instructors' Speaking Skills

Nancy R. Goulden
Kansas State University

"Demosthenes, the famous classical orator, was asked 'What are the three most important aspects of public speaking?' His answer: 'Delivery, delivery, delivery.'"
(Nelson & Pearson, 1990, p. 200)

Importance of Speaking Skills

Almost any oral, teacher-directed instruction involves public speaking whether the primary mode is lecture, guided discussion, recitation, or directing small group work (Lowman, 1984). Instructors can enhance the effectiveness of oral instruction through attention to both the verbal and non-verbal aspects of their teaching. Many educators spend a great deal of time and effort in choosing the organization, examples, and words they plan to use in class. (See IDEA Paper No. 14, Improving Lectures; Cashin, 1985.) However, this thoughtful preparation may be wasted, or at least undermined, if the content is delivered *poorly*. Researchers have found that students whose teachers use dynamic, vocally skillful delivery are more successful at both comprehending and retaining information than are students whose teachers have weak presentation skills (Beighley, 1952; Centra, 1977; Coats & Smidchens, 1966; Vohs, 1964).

The average watcher/listener can judge whether a lecturer's delivery is effective. High or low student ratings of teaching correspond with trained raters' scores of effective or ineffective speaking skills (Albanese, Case, Schuldt, & Brown, (in press). However, an extensive and complex set of vocal and bodily behaviors combine to produce what is called **"speaker delivery."** Even if audience members were to agree on just which behaviors are important in oral delivery, individual backgrounds often provide a diverse set of "do's and don'ts" for the appropriate execution of those behaviors. In order to provide guidelines to aid the college instructor when speaking to most classroom audiences, this writer reviewed recent editions of five of the most popular public speaking texts in use at the college level (Bradley, 1988; Gronbeck, McKerrow, Ehninger & Monroe, 1990; Lucas, 1989; Nelson & Pearson, 1990; Sprague & Stuart, 1984). The recommendations of these communication authors are based on contemporary experimental research of effective speaking and on the classroom experience of the authors. In addition, two texts written for college teachers (Lowman, 1984; McKeachie, 1986) provided additional suggestions about 1) what is effective lecture delivery, 2) how lecturers can analyze their classroom delivery, and 3) how lecturers can improve their classroom delivery.

ED 350627

What is Effective Speaking?

Effective speaking is determined by both positive and negative elements. For example, using vocal and bodily behaviors which promote audience attention and clear transmission of the speaker's ideas and facts is positive; distracting behaviors are negative. Effective delivery should *not* call attention to itself either through unconscious acts such as nervously tapping one's fingers, or through deliberately planned features such as elegant gestures which are so styled and mannered they become a dance independent of the words of the speaker. The attention of the students should be on the content the lecturer wishes to share, *not* on what the speaker is doing or failing to do (e.g., making eye contact or changing vocal pitch) . Therefore, two means leading to effective speaking are 1) the **elimination of distractors**, and 2) the **use of the voice and body to deliver the message so that the presentation seems effortless.**

Textbook authors agree that delivery supports the content best when the presentation appears to be natural and the speaker looks and sounds much as people do during ordinary conversation. At the same time the teacher must project the image of the credible expert. Consequently, college teachers are faced with the difficult task of trying to be themselves in front of the class, *only better.* Speaker credibility depends on the students' perception of the instructor as competent, trustworthy, sincere, attractive and dynamic. These attributes are primarily conveyed to the audience through the *nonverbal* aspects of delivery. If there is a conflict between verbal and nonverbal messages, audiences tend to believe the nonverbal message and reject the verbal. This means that, although a lecturer may be an outstanding expert in the content field, if he or she appears to be inept when speaking because of nervous or distracting mannerism, the students may decide the information and the speaker are insignificant and ignore what the lecturer has to say.

How Can Lecturers Analyze Their Delivery?

The only information many speakers collect about their presentation skills comes through the clouded mirror of audience reaction or the fleeting, peripheral sights and sounds they half hear or glimpse in mid-speech. These are just not enough! We cannot determine if we are creating barriers to student attention and comprehension without a more complete representation of how we look and sound to the listeners. Teachers can solicit more direct audience feedback by, for example, asking a trusted colleague to sit in on a class and share perceptions of presentational behaviors, or by requesting specific information related to delivery when using student rating forms. Audiotapes and videotapes of actual classes are an obvious source for analysis. Using an audiotape when studying *vocal* delivery allows the speaker to focus on the impact of the voice alone without distractions of visual body signals. Watching a videotape with the sound *off*

provides the analogous advantages when checking the visual *non-verbal* elements. Although watching and listening to oneself can be anxiety provoking and at times discouraging, change cannot begin without identifying areas where the speaker can improve.

Improving Delivery

Vocal Delivery. The following 32 recommendations highlight aspects of effective delivery. The first two sets of recommendations focus on **vocal delivery**. College teachers can examine them by analyzing a voice tape. The first nine relate to **vocal problems** that public speakers often encounter. These are problems because either the behavior becomes the primary focus of the listeners' attention to the exclusion of the speaker's content, or the listeners have to work so hard to hear and understand the words that they give up and let their minds wander.

1. **Speak loud enough** so that the listeners do *not* have to strain to hear.
2. **Do *not* speak so loudly** that sounds are distorted or that you--the speaker--cannot maintain a natural conversational tone.
3. **Articulate precisely enough** that the audience can understand the words without effort.
4. **Do *not* exaggerate the articulation** so that sounds draw inappropriate attention to themselves (especially final consonants). Some speakers explode sounds such as the final "t" in "not," or they let the "t" sound blend into the next word (e.g., instead of "not over," the speaker is heard to say "naw tover").
5. **Do *not* speak so rapidly** that both the speaker and the listeners become fatigued.
6. **Do *not* speak so slowly** that listeners become bored and their attention wanders while waiting for the next word. Listeners perceive speakers who speak relatively rapidly as more competent and persuasive than those who speak very slowly.
7. **Do *not* fill pauses with vocalizers** such as "a," "um" or filler words such as "okay," "now," " you know." Changing this behavior requires awareness, concentration and the realization that a brief silence is less noticeable than a meaningless sound.
8. **Vary the pitch** so that all words do not sound the same. Listeners interpret what they call "monotone" speech as a signal that the speaker either does not care about the topic or lacks confidence.
9. **Do *not* use repetitive patterns of pitch and emphasis** (almost a sing-song quality) which do not reflect the meaning of the words. You may find that you always drop your voice and stop to breathe after the same number of beats whether the meaning of the sentence dictates a pause or not. A good defense against a mechanical delivery is to **concentrate on the meaning** of what you are saying rather than on the sound of your voice.

The next seven recommendations focus on **positive vocal strategies.**

10. **Have your voice replicate the natural rhythms and pitch changes of conversation.** It may help to make an audiotape of a normal conversation and compare it to your teaching delivery.
11. **Slow down when explaining *complex* or *difficult material.***
12. **Increase the pace to reflect changes** in the mood or content, or to regain audience attention.
13. **Pause to emphasize *important* content.**
14. **Pause to allow the students to understand** and assimilate information, **or to respond** to rhetorical questions or to humor. Your jokes may be very funny, yet the students may not laugh unless you signal with a pause that it is acceptable to react.
15. **Change volume** (either increasing or decreasing) **for emphasis** or to regain attention of audience.
16. **Use standard pronunciation** and check the pronunciation of all unfamiliar words.

Use of Body. The next two sets of recommendations concern the use of the body and its relationship to effective speaking delivery. The first eleven recommendations concern **distracting or audience-frustrating physical behaviors.**

17. **Be sure that the audience can see you**. The room should be well lighted and free from visual obstructions like pillars if at all possible. In a large room or lecture hall, it may be necessary to remain standing all of the time so that students are not frustrated by not being able to see the speaker.
18. **Do *not* let a speaker's stand form a barrier** between you and the students. If all they can see are your face and hands, the stand probably is a barrier.
19. **Do *not* be too static.** The lecturer who stands motionless in one spot, with hands anchored to the speaker's stand, misses an opportunity to provide the audience with "something to watch." The result is the audience becomes bored and begins to think of other things.
20. **Do *not* constantly walk** from place to place without motivation. It is especially important to remain in place when explaining very complex material.
21. **Do *not* use distracting hand and arm gestures.** If the watchers become aware of the movements, the gestures become distracting. Audiences especially notice the stiffness of consciously planned gestures and the tiny, jerky movements of aborted gestures which never quite materialize.
22. **Do *not* use repetitive hand or arm movements** unless they reinforce or are coordinated with the verbal messages.
23. **Avoid negative facial expressions**, ones that seem cold or hostile, or project boredom or a lack of interest in the topic. Of course, you will not deliberately set out to create unpleasant facial expressions; they often come from a reluctance to let the students see how you feel or a belief that the most appropriate facial expressions for teaching should be reserved, serious and formal. Try to just relax and let your face naturally reflect your feelings and thoughts. Go ahead and smile, if that is how you feel.
24. **Avoid distracting the audience** by looking at the ceiling, out the window, or into the hall. Look at the audience or at your visual aids.
25. **Do *not* look at your notes, etc. more than 20% of the time.**

26. **Make *true* eye contact with your audience.** Do not just skim the audience or look at their chins, foreheads, or at the air above students' heads.
27. **Make sure that your personal appearance and clothing convey the image you wish to project.**

The final five recommendations deal with **positive body delivery characteristics.**

28. **Move from place to place as a physical representation of the structure of the lecture.** For example, move a few steps when changing to a new subtopic in the lecture.
29. **Move to reestablish audience attention or to allow the audience to rest by changing position.** The movement also produces the added benefit of helping you to relax by releasing tension.
30. **Use mime or air pictures to clarify or emphasize content.** The number of gestures is *not* important; their appropriateness is.
31. **Constantly reestablish the link between you and the students** by making direct eye contact with individual members of the audience. *Initially*, you may want to seek out the active responders for feedback and to help you gain confidence. However, at some point, all members of the audience deserve and need contact.
32. **Project enthusiasm** for the content and the sharing of the content with the audience by your facial expression and bodily stance.

How Can You Put These Recommendations into Practice?

The first obvious step toward improving your instructional delivery is by being aware of how you look and sound. You may be shocked to discover that what you thought was a moderate, considerate pace of speaking, on the tape sounds like a record played at too slow a speed, or that what you considered precise articulation sounds artificial and affected. **Simply knowing that a problem exists can help to eliminate or at least reduce it.** We can increase volume, slow down, speed up, open our mouths wider and more conscientiously produce the consonant sounds, monitor our speech for meaningless vocalizers, stop pacing back and forth, move away from the speaker's stand when changing the topic, and deliberately lock eyes with audience members. As we begin to alter speaking behaviors, **we need to continue to receive feedback on how we look and sound.** More tapes, peer and student reports can be collected. In addition, as we become more aware of our vocal and body behaviors — especially those on our "change" list — we will find that a part of our attention during the lecture can be directed toward reducing distractors and working on improvements. If we watch and listen to the students during class, they constantly provide nonverbal feedback about how effective our lecturing is.

Effective delivery does *not* depend on a "bag of tricks," or a set of choreographed moves or emphasized words. There is *no one right way* to present a lecture, but those who are most successful share the same secrets about delivery style, mental focus, and preparation.

Delivery Style. Outstanding lecturers **talk to the audience.** If you read or recite your lecture, the students become outsiders, only occasionally eavesdropping on what you are saying. The most important link is between the teacher and the students. The script must not get in the way. Rather than writing the lecture word for word, **develop an extensive set of notes. Use color-coded highlighters** to allow quick identification and location of specific words or information in the notes. **Refer to your notes as little as possible.**

Educator's Mental Focus. If lecturers are to teach and not merely broadcast information out into the air, then they must focus on the content and the transmission of that content to the students, not on how uncomfortable they feel. It is normal to feel nervous and self-conscious when facing a new audience of students or a new situation. In your anxiety, you may even feel you are looking out over rows of judges just waiting for you to fail. This performance apprehension causes some speakers to seek safety by impersonally reading the lecture, making little or no eye contact, and producing flat voice and facial signals. We, as teachers, should look at the class situation as a collaborative enterprise involving both the students and ourselves. Working on learning the content together, the students can become our allies. The passion we have for our field and for helping students learn can carry us to a natural, enthusiastic delivery style. Many of the distractors will disappear when we forget about ourselves and are no longer inhibited by apprehension. Hands naturally gesture, the face lights up, the words we need are just there. Eye contact becomes real and the ideal circular flow of communication from instructor to student and back again just happens.

Preparation. Perhaps it goes without saying that **successful lecturers are well prepared.** However, that preparation must include *more than just the content* of the lecture. **Part of the preparation includes visiting the classroom** and planning how to adapt to the room and make maximum use of the space. The instructor needs to decide where to stand to be seen and heard, where to place the desk or speaker's stand, where and how to display visual aids, where to walk. **Effective speaking also requires mental, emotional, and physical warmup immediately before class.** Of these the **emotional** may be the most important. A few minutes of private time thinking about the class to come, reviewing the content so it becomes new and exciting to the teacher can help the lecturer to meet the students ready to share that excitement. **Physical** movement, walking across campus, sprinting up the stairs can warm the body up so the lecturer is ready to gesture and move freely and naturally.

In a study designed to identify the traits of the best and poorest speakers that a group of students had ever heard, Henrikson (1944, p. 124) discovered that best speakers were those who spoke "without notes ... and in an optimistic mood" with "good speech material, good delivery, a good voice, and a good personality." Developing these traits is very achievable if we, as teachers, understand the characteristics of good delivery, are willing to carefully analyze our own delivery, to eradicate as many distracting behaviors as we can, to use the extemporaneous mode of delivery, to prepare, and above all to develop an optimistic, enthusiastic attitude.

References

Those references below which are followed by an asterisk are either public speaking textbooks or texts written for college teachers. Each has one or more sections on speaking skills.

Albanese, M. A., Case, D. E., Schuldt, S. S., & Brown, D. D. (in press). The validity of student lecture ratings using concurrent ratings by non-student trained observers as a criteria. *Academic Medicine.*

Beighley, K. C. (1952). An experimental study of the effect of four speech variables on listener comprehension. *Speech Monographs, 19,* 249-258.

Bradley, B. E. (1988). *Speech communication: The credibility of ideas.* Dubuque, IA: Wm. C. Brown.*

Cashin, W. E. (1985). *Improving lectures.* IDEA Paper No. 14. Manhattan: Kansas State University, Center for Faculty Evaluation and Development. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 267 921)

Centra, J. A. (1977). Student ratings of instruction and their relationship to student learning. *American Educational Research Journal, 14,* 17-24.

Coats, W. D., & Smidchens, U. (1966). Audience recall as a function of speaker dynamism. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 57,* 189-191.

Gronbeck, B. E., McKerrow, R. E., Ehninger, D., & Monroe, A. H. (1990). *Principles and types of speech communication.* Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman/Little Brown Higher Education.*

Henrikson, E. H. (1944). An analysis of the characteristics of some 'good' and 'poor' speakers. *Speech Monographs, 11,* 120-124.

Lowman, J. (1984). *Mastering the techniques of teaching.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.*

Lucas, S. E. (1989). *The art of public speaking.* New York: Random House.*

McKeachie, W. J. (1986). *Teaching tips: A guidebook for the beginning college teacher* (8th ed.). Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath.*

Nelson, P. E., & Pearson, J. C. (1990). *Confidence in public speaking.* Dubuque, IA: Wm. C. Brown.*

Sprague, J., & Stuart, D. (1984). *The speaker's handbook.* San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.*

Vohs, J. L. (1964). An empirical approach to the concept of attention. *Speech Monographs, 31,* 355-360.

Copyright 1991 Center for Faculty Evaluation and Development, Kansas State University

IDEA Papers may be ordered from the Center. Individual copies are $1.00. A complete set of IDEA Papers may be ordered for $7.00. Bulk orders: 25-99 copies are 25 cents per copy; 100 or more copies are 20 cents per copy. Orders of less than $30.00 must be prepaid.